

## The Letters of Demetrios Kydones to Empress Helena Kantakouzene Palaiologina

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The correspondence of Demetrios Kydones contains over 450 letters addressed to his friends and acquaintances and spans over fifty years. The letters reveal the inner workings of a defined social group to which Kydones and his correspondents belonged. For the most part this group consisted of men of learning and influence, leaders in civil and ecclesiastical life, who lived in Constantinople, Thessalonica, and in the Peloponnese and who wrote to each other in a language that served as an outward sign, as it were, of their social position and cultural attainments. Among those to whom Kydones addressed his letters were members of the imperial family such as John VI Kantakouzenos, John V Palaiologos, and especially Manuel II, to whom he wrote eighty letters over a period of some twenty-five years.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, six letters are also addressed to the youngest daughter of John VI, Helena Kantakouzene Palaiologina (1333/4–97), who married John V and became an empress in May 1347 in the church of the Blachernai in Constantinople.<sup>2</sup> Empress Helena, daughter, wife, and mother of the

three imperial masters whom Kydones spent most of his life serving, is the only woman on record as a lifelong friend and correspondent of his. The letters that Kydones wrote to Helena (letters 389, 25, 256, 143, 134, and 222) span a period of nearly fifty years, from 1347–52 to 1392. This fact alone renders his correspondence with the empress unusual. Even more significant, three of the six letters are primarily concerned with literary works, either Kydones' or Helena's, and two reveal details of Helena's political role in the government of her husband and son. Therefore, a study of his six letters to her is worthwhile for the light it sheds on the empress, on Kydones, and on their lengthy relationship. With the exception of the unusually long letter 222, which, for the sake of brevity, is summarized and excerpted, they are fully translated and discussed below in the approximate chronological order established by R.-J. Loenertz in his edition of Kydones' correspondence.

### I. LETTER 389

In letter 389 (dated 1347–52), the earliest extant letter to Helena, Kydones praises the young empress for her fine writing style; she had composed *epinikioi logoi* to celebrate her father's victories. Kydones was then in the early years of his government service as John VI's *mesazōn*, or minister for government affairs, a position that he held from 1347 to the emperor's abdication in 1354. During at least some of these years, he lived at the imperial palace and was almost continually at the emperor's disposal.<sup>3</sup> He may have had daily contact with the emperor's youngest daughter, and had already mastered the classical idiom and was beginning that study of Latin that led to his translations of

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<sup>1</sup>Complete edition: *Démétrius Cydonès Correspondance* (hereafter *Corr.*), ed. R.-J. Loenertz, 2 vols., ST 186 and 208 (Vatican City, 1956, 1960). Partial edition, 50 letters with French translation: *Démétrius Cydonès Correspondance*, ed. G. Cammelli (Paris, 1930); includes letters 25 (C 12) and 222 (C 28). German translation and commentary: F. Tinnefeld, *Demetrios Kydones Briefe* (hereafter *Briefe*), Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur 12, 16, 33 (Stuttgart, 1981–91); includes letters 25 (T 92), 134 (T 113), 143 (T 153), and 389 (T 24). The dates and the numbering of the letters and line numbers referred to throughout this article are those used in Loenertz' Greek edition.

<sup>2</sup>For a summary of Helena's life, see D. M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Family of Kantakouzenos (Cantacuzenus) ca. 1100–1460: A Genealogical Study*, DOS 11 (Washington, D.C., 1968), 135–38; see also *PLP* 9 (Vienna, 1989), no. 21365, which discusses the dates of her birth and death.

<sup>3</sup>Kantakouzenos, *History*, IV, 39, Bonn ed., III, 285.5–9.

theological works by, among others, Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas.

### Translation

Noble words have been presented to a noble father by a noble daughter, appropriate to the occasions and appropriate to the deeds about which they have been spoken, delighting all who know how to judge the elegance of words, and captivating the emperor even more. For to fathers, sweet are the voices of their children, even when they babble. But if beauty is added to what is being said, and the words preserve the grace that comes from Athens, everyone knows that this surpasses even a father's prayers. And what is surpassing is that the sounds are those of a girl and that men yield to a woman in literary matters, and that what nature too recoils from, your zeal and labor have obtained for you. Therefore, one must not be persuaded by Sophocles, who has called silence the only ornament for women to wear, and one must consider that the honors that come from literature have been given to them also, when they do not deal in gossip but practice the eloquence of the poets and prose writers. For then all men give up criticizing, they rejoice and stamp their feet, preferring the ringing sound of a woman's words to conventional silence. I, too, experienced this when I heard that sound blossoming in a woman, which in my opinion has been long absent even among men. I therefore pray for this kind of beauty for you rather than that of Helen of Troy. For that beauty did not profit the woman who had it, and also destroyed the heroes who fought the long war on account of it. But the beauty of literature is immortal, and each one who gazes at it receives something good and leaves the better for it. May the emperor, too, who has supplied the incentive for your words, hear the triumphal odes from a loving voice, and thus enjoy the pleasure in two ways, by both the greatness of his deeds and by his noble daughter's fashioning a crown of words for him.

### Commentary

At the time Kydones addressed letter 389 to Helena, she was a young married woman, probably still in her teens. His letter is a skillful, elegant appreciation of her literary studies, which resulted in her composition of certain eulogies of her father's deeds. None of Helena's writings are extant. Kydones, however, praises her work for its "Attic

grace" (line 8: τὴν Ἀθήνηθεν ὥραν) and commends her industry in pursuing her studies. Her success in writing is enough to persuade him that Sophocles was wrong: silence is not the only ornament for women (lines 10–13; cf. *Ajax* 293: γυναιξὶ κόσμον ἢ σιγὴ φέρει).

Kydones' tone in this letter is that of an older man—he was about ten years her senior—experienced in literature and respected for his literary judgment. At the time of this letter he was already recognized for his mastery of the classical idiom. Nearly three dozen of his letters are extant from the years 1341–54, including the lengthy letter 5, which could be considered a rhetorical description, or *ekphrasis*, as much as a letter.<sup>4</sup> There are as well three longer rhetorical compositions, the two *Speeches to John VI* and the *Monody on the Dead in Thessalonica*.<sup>5</sup> His reputation for an exceptional knowledge of classical literature and his success at imitating the highly prized Attic style are evident. During this period he may already have envisaged a future publication of his letters and, with that in mind, have begun to collect them in the series of notebooks that have been examined and discussed by Loenertz as a preliminary to his edition of the correspondence.<sup>6</sup>

Letter 389 is perhaps Kydones' response to a presentation of Helena's compositions, as later her son Manuel II was to send his literary efforts to Kydones for criticism or approval. In fact, the letter seems to indicate that he was giving some instruction to Helena in classical language and literature, as he would also later do for Manuel.<sup>7</sup> Kydones might even have set her the task of composition as a scholastic exercise. He encourages Helena to continue her literary work, as any good teacher would encourage a promising student. Perhaps already a confirmed bachelor—he was to remain unmarried throughout his life—Kydones mentions the destructive beauty of Helen of Troy and wishes her imperial namesake a different kind of beauty: the "beauty of literature," which is "immortal" (line 20) and makes better those who practice it. The study of literature is its own reward, a maxim true even for a young empress.

<sup>4</sup> *Corr.*, I, pp. 26–31.

<sup>5</sup> *First Speech to John VI* (1347), ed. R.-J. Loenertz, in *Corr.*, I, pp. 1–10; *Second Speech to John VI*, ed. G. Cammelli, *BNJ* 4 (1923), 77–83; *Monody*, PG 109, cols. 639–52.

<sup>6</sup> See R.-J. Loenertz, *Les recueils de lettres de Démétrius Cydonès*, ST 131 (Vatican City, 1947).

<sup>7</sup> Suggested in R.-J. Loenertz, "Démétrius Cydonès, I: De la naissance à l'année 1373," *OCP* 36 (1970), 51–52.

## II. LETTER 25

Kydones sent letter 25 (dated 1371–74?) to Helena as a cover letter together with certain of his translations from the works of St. Augustine.

*Translation*

Can you imagine how pleased I am at seeing you take pleasure in literature and absolutely preferring a life of learning to everything else? For not only does your love of learning encourage rejoicing in those who desire that great things always be said about you, but also, because of your eagerness for it, learning does not seem to be completely despised, and there seem to be some people who even long for it. If what is honored by rulers has many admirers, perhaps someone who looks toward your example will also covet the honor that comes from learning and will advise others to work hard for its sake. Thus through your learning will speak up boldly once again, and what is truly good will also be considered good. I too, then, wanted to contribute something to you and, by my own contribution, increase your beautiful, insatiable desire for fine things.

Because I have such a desire of the will, but my intellectual ability does not suffice for its full realization, I have not failed to borrow my own contribution from elsewhere. The man who has substituted full payment for my poverty is a "Scribe, instructed in the Kingdom of Heaven, who brings forth from his storeroom things new and old" (cf. Matt. 13:52). For there is nothing more ancient than truth or newer than it, since it preserves its youth and vigor agelessly for all time. This man is honored more than anyone else by the Romans among whom he was born, and all the Christian councils have so revered him that they defined the truth in his terms. Who knew more than he did what parts of Plato and Aristotle are in agreement with the faith, and who fought more vigorously than he did those parts that are contrary to it? Who censured heresies more than he did, solved difficulties for those who were searching, established rules for those who chose the monastic life, and, by his kind voice, drew together from all sides into the Church the scattered children of God, since he demonstrated that outside of it righteousness would be of no avail? Everything considered, who has done so much for the Church in all things that for this reason he was called "father of fathers," and even by the greatest of them, who called Augustine "the most eminent, excellent

teacher of the truth," and said that if a man did not heed his words as if they were divinely inspired, he would be numbered among the damned? I offer you the works of this man in place of my own, not gold in place of bronze, as Homer says (cf. *Iliad*, VI, 236), but heaven in place of earth.

Those thoughts, then, that are great and clear and able to aid your soul, consider them to be from his mind, and praise them. If, however, some passages are obscure and do not seem to agree with the others, perhaps you must seek a teacher for these. And perhaps it would be right to blame the translator as well. But, rather, may his readers pardon him. For there were not many Latin books available to me, and those from which I selected these works had been written unclearly, and I, by surmising, had rather to guess at the letters. Besides, I have no one here to act as my instructor for the doubtful passages. But I know that, devoting yourself to the writings and becoming full of the simple piety of the man, you will laugh at those who divide Hellene and Scythian in Christ (cf. Col. 3:11), and who ask about the native lands of writers rather than their ideas.

*Commentary*

Kydones' first letter to the young Helena, letter 389, could be taken as pure flattery of the emperor's daughter by a court official, but for the testimony of letter 25, written to the empress over twenty years later. She is still interested and involved in learning, perhaps still composing works of her own in the classical style. To encourage her, and perhaps to gain her sympathy for his own interests, Kydones chooses to send her not a rhetorical composition of his own, but some of his many translations from Latin theologians.

Kydones' best-known translations from Latin are from the works of Thomas Aquinas. In 1354, encouraged by Helena's father, John VI, he completed a Greek version of the *Summa contra gentiles*, and he later translated parts of the *Summa theologica*.<sup>8</sup> Following the success of his initial translations from the works of Aquinas, Kydones went on

<sup>8</sup>Demetrios Kydones, *Apology I*, ed. G. Mercati, in *Notizie di Procoro e Demetrio Cidone . . .*, ST 56 (Vatican City, 1931), p. 363, lines 18–23; cf. F. Kianka, "The *Apology* of Demetrius Cydones: A Fourteenth-Century Autobiographical Source," *ByzSt* 7 (1980), 63–64. See also idem, "Demetrius Cydones and Thomas Aquinas," *Byzantion* 52 (1982), 264–86, which cites the earlier literature. For a partial edition of Kydones' translation of Aquinas' *Summa theologica*, see E. Moutsopoulos, gen. ed., *Θωμά Ἀκρινάτου: Σοῦμμα θεολογικὴ ἐξελληνισθεῖσα*, *Corpus philosoporum graecorum recentiorum*, 15–16 (Athens, 1976–79).

to translate various other Latin patristic and scholastic texts. Because of the great amount of time and effort that he devoted to them and because of their importance for his intellectual development, the translations can be considered one of his major accomplishments.

After Aquinas, Augustine was the Latin theologian whose writings received the greatest share of his attention. For Kydones, Augustine's reputation as a theologian was beyond reproach of any kind: Augustine was a scholarly man and a saint, who had been greatly honored by the Church for his wisdom, virtue, and theology (lines 16–17).<sup>9</sup> His doctrinal teachings had been approved and confirmed by church councils, and he had been called "the father of fathers," "the most excellent teacher of the truth" (lines 27–30). And, most important for a Byzantine perhaps, Augustine also knew what parts of Plato and Aristotle were in agreement with the faith (lines 22–23).

This letter clearly indicates Kydones' warm regard and deep respect for the greatest of the Latin church fathers. In his opinion, Augustine was a highly respected authority in theology, but he was also a man of piety, whose "kindly voice" had drawn the "scattered children of God into the Church" (lines 25–26). Kydones' acquaintance with Augustine's works had been deep enough to cause him to be attracted by Augustine the man, who, unlike Aquinas, revealed himself to his readers in virtually every line he wrote.

Unlike Kydones' translations from Aquinas, his Augustinian translations cannot be dated with accuracy. Letter 25 to Helena represents one vague indication. From the content it is clear that it was written as a cover letter for certain translations from the works of Augustine that Kydones was sending the empress as a gift (lines 12–16). No specific works of Augustine are mentioned, however, nor can the letter itself be dated with assurance. The editor's suggestion of 1371–74 was probably made on the basis of its position in the manuscript. Then, too, a number of texts that Kydones translated as Augustine's were commonly held in the Middle Ages to be authentic works of Augustine, but were later determined to be incorrectly attributed to him. Therefore, some or all of the works referred to in letter 25 could have been pseudo-

Augustinian.<sup>10</sup> Kydones' reasons for translating Augustine were at least partly polemical. Augustine was one of the Latin theologians whom he urged his compatriots not only to read but to accept as an authority on controversial points of theology such as the procession of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Kydones mentions that he does not have a teacher of Latin in Constantinople whom he could consult concerning the more difficult passages (lines 39–40). His original instructor in Latin may have been Philip de Bindo Incontri, also known as Philip of Pera. He resided in the Dominican house in Pera in the 1350s, but is not mentioned in any source later than 1362. If he had been Kydones' Latin instructor, he had either died or left Constantinople by the time of Kydones' letter 25.

Apparently Helena, as Kydones advised, had tolerance and perhaps respect for Latin theologians, and, as is clear from his references to her love of learning, she saw no insurmountable obstacle to combining classical studies and Christianity. But though she shared his love of literature, she did not share his theological opinions. Her father, John VI, had a great regard for Kydones because of his secular learning, which he combined with an exemplary way of life that appeared almost monastic.<sup>12</sup> John VI himself combined secular learning and a preoccupation with philosophy, theology, and the ascetic life. He patronized men of learning such as Barlaam the Calabrian, Nicholas Kabasilas, and Kydones, was an avid book collector, and encouraged Kydones' translations. But he was also a strong supporter of the theology of Gregory Palamas, and when he finally abdicated as emperor he entered a monastery to become the monk Joasaph. Helena also appears to have been a supporter of Gregory Palamas, but, like her father, this did not prevent her from maintaining a special friendship and regard for Kydones, who was one of the best-known anti-Palamites and pro-Latin polemicists of

<sup>9</sup>See also Demetrios Kydones, *Defense of Thomas Aquinas*, Vat. gr. 614, fol. 122, lines 4–6, which praise Augustine in a similar manner.

<sup>10</sup>For Kydones' translations from Augustine and Pseudo-Augustine, see M. Rackl, "Die griechischen Augustinusübersetzungen," ST 37 (Rome, 1924), 1–38; and especially Tinnefeld, *Briefe*, I, 1, 68–69. For works of Augustine and Ps.-Augustine translated by his brother, the hieromonk Prochoros, see the editions by H. Hunger, *Prochoros Kydones, Übersetzung von acht Briefen des Hl. Augustinus* and *Prochoros Kydones' Übersetzungen* . . . (Vienna, 1984, 1990).

<sup>11</sup>An edition of his polemical treatise *On the Authority of the Latin Church Fathers*, Vat. gr. 1879, fols. 50–59, is in preparation by the present writer; for a summary, see F. Kianka, "A Late Byzantine Defense of the Latin Church Fathers," *OCP* 49 (1983), 419–25.

<sup>12</sup>Kantakouzenos, *History*, IV, 16, Bonn ed., III, 107.14–20.

his day. Despite all this, Kydones felt free to send Helena some of his translations, no doubt expecting them to be well received.

Helena's husband, John V, was not inclined toward literature or study, and apparently had little patience for listening to literary or rhetorical works. In letter 117 (dated 1373),<sup>13</sup> addressed to John V, Kydones apologizes for writing the emperor a letter that exceeds the proper length: "I know that I've gone beyond the proper length of a letter, especially since I know that you do not gladly listen to long speeches. But misfortune has made me loquacious" (lines 75–77). The letter in question was seventy-nine lines long, about double the average length of one of Kydones' letters. Manuel II, however, took after his mother and grandfather in his taste for literature and learning. Kydones relied on Manuel to counteract his father's lack of sympathy for literary pursuits. For example, in letter 236 to Manuel (1380–82?),<sup>14</sup> Kydones asks him to intercede with the senior emperor John V on behalf of literature and learning, allowing it to play a role at court and in his government: "... persuade the emperor not to rely entirely on the enemies of learning, nor allow them to strut about and plunder everything (lines 12–14). . . . for such is the power of eloquence that all is done well and easily and with praising for those who possess it. . . . May the noble emperor take account of literature and not consider the honor from it less worthy than that from the purple robe" (lines 24–29).

### III. LETTER 256

Kydones' letter 256 to Helena<sup>15</sup> (undated) is, like letter 25, a cover letter sent to the empress with a copy of Kydones' work. On this occasion the work was a sermon on "the martyr" (line 5), that is, St. Lawrence.

#### *Translation*

My motive for writing the present work was not a display of talent and the applause expected for it, but what motivated me was repayment for the great help that I enjoyed from the martyr. I did not think it right to hide the good deed in silence, although I know that I am not saying anything worthy of his aid, nonetheless I am protecting my-

self from being blamed for ingratitude. This was what kept me from sending you the work, for what should I have taken pride in, since I am making a very small return for the great need that was fulfilled, especially since I am convinced that there is nothing in the work worthy of your hearing? But since you thought it best to be patient with my foolishness, I am sending it, although I know that I will take away most of the good opinion that you have of me, but nevertheless knowing that I am yielding to your commands. I ask my reader to consider that the work is not written by someone who loves honor but rather by a person who is acquitting himself of an obligation.

#### *Commentary*

This letter also indicates Helena's continued interest in literary work, as well as Kydones' continuing relationship with her. As noted above, the letter is undated in the edition of Loenertz, but Franz Tinnefeld dates Kydones' composition of the sermon on St. Lawrence to 1379–82(?). The work is unedited, and is found in two manuscripts: London, Burneyanus 73, fols. 1–240 and Oxford, Bodleianus Barocc. 90, fols. 63–101.<sup>16</sup> It is mentioned in Kydones' letter 213 (undated, but perhaps 1379–82) to Nicholas Kabasilas, also a cover letter sent to Kabasilas with a copy of the sermon.<sup>17</sup> The letter includes the same *topos*, in which Kydones minimizes or denies his writing ability (letter 213, line 4). Kydones also wrote a sermon on the Annunciation in honor of the Virgin,<sup>18</sup> again in return for favors received. His letter 384 to a friend,<sup>19</sup> which mentions this work, begins in a way similar to letter 256 to Helena, but goes on to describe the controversial nature of the theological points made in the Annunciation sermon. Because of this, Kydones did not want it published, and gave a copy to only one of his friends, whom he told to read it "behind closed doors" (letter 384, lines 5–7). However, the sermon on St. Lawrence, which he sent to Helena together with letter 256, does not appear to have been the subject of controversy, and Kydones states that he withheld it from circulation merely because of its lack of literary merit.

<sup>16</sup> Tinnefeld, *Briefe*, I.1, 64.

<sup>17</sup> *Corr.*, II, p. 92. For Kabasilas' reply to this letter, see *ibid.*, I, p. 170.

<sup>18</sup> Unedited; see Tinnefeld, *Briefe*, I.1, 64 for manuscripts.

<sup>19</sup> *Corr.*, II, pp. 334–35; undated, but perhaps from 1387–88.

<sup>13</sup> *Corr.*, I, pp. 155–57.

<sup>14</sup> *Corr.*, II, pp. 137–38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

## IV. LETTER 143

Kydones wrote letter 143 (dated 1374–75?)<sup>20</sup> to Helena as another cover letter, addressed to her together with a gift of fruit from his garden.

*Translation*

The most noble emperors, wishing that this paradox too be attributed to them, every day add more to the wealth of the rich, and have added so much, moreover, that the rich do not know how to make use of what they have been given. But, on the other hand, the emperors do not allow us poor people to enjoy our property without hindrance. And because of this, and before the peak season for the medlars, there were many orders concerning their protection and many a command about keeping these fruits for them alone. For my fruit is sweeter than that of others, they said, and the best must be reserved for the emperors. And when it is time to pick the fruit, they say it is also time for them to enjoy it, and they do not allow us farmers who work hard to enjoy the first fruits of our labors, nor do they even allow us to touch the last ones, and besides compel us to carry our own produce to them. And if we should taste one that falls, the same laws that are against temple robbers are immediately put into action against us, and one must also pay the penalty for daring to partake of one's own things. They therefore do not even allow us to enjoy the little farm that we cultivate. But although I swore to obey the emperors in all things by day, at night I exercise my rights, and, stealing my own fruit, I taste it and send some to those to whom it is right to send it, before sending it to the emperors. And would I not appear to be unjust if I shared it with others before sending some to you, to whom it is more just to bring the whole crop even, as if I were bringing it to my lady and the mistress of everything I own and the one who cultivates the farmer himself by her favors every day? But if the imperial decree must prevail, and I must keep my labors for the emperors because they think it right, the empress is certainly not absent from the list of emperors. Fortune numbers her among the emperors, but virtue classes her with the emperor of emperors.

*Commentary*

This charming and amusing letter to Helena characterizes the empress as his special patron,

<sup>20</sup> *Corr.*, II, pp. 12–13.

who “cultivates” him and to whom he owes “everything.” She is his special friend, patron, and ally at court. Similar thoughts are expressed in Kydones’ letter 222 to Helena (see below), which also notes how much Kydones’ financial well-being and position at court are due to her generosity and her favors toward him. The emperors whom Kydones has sworn to obey (line 19) are John V and his co-emperor Manuel II. The “emperor of emperors” (line 27) is Christ.

## V. LETTER 134

Kydones wrote letter 134 (dated 1373–74)<sup>21</sup> to Helena during his stay on Lesbos as the guest of her brother-in-law Francesco I Gattilusio. Kydones had gone there in somewhat suspicious circumstances. Emperors John V and Manuel II seem to have suspected him of conspiring with Gattilusio against their interests. In 1374, when the emperors were forced into a policy of collaboration with the Ottomans, Gattilusio was still vigorously anti-Turkish, and later, in 1376, he supported Andronikos IV when he revolted against his father.<sup>22</sup>

*Translation*

The treasure that I did not appreciate earlier when I had it, loss now teaches me its price. I was able to visit you when I wanted to, I could enjoy your conversation, which God prepared as a remedy for those who suffer, and when I was tossed about from all directions, I could take refuge at your side, as in a peaceful harbor that is closed to none. All this did not allow me to appreciate your goodness, and I paid little heed to it, as one of those things that one has become habituated to. This also happens with regard to health, good weather, human glory, and, in short, other good things—when we have them, we scarcely enjoy them, but when they depart, we call after them with cries and tears. And now, far from your precious qualities, I understand what kind of wealth I have been deprived of, so much has it become impossible for me to encounter even a shadow of your goodness. But may God put an end to my sadness over these things, show me once again the source of my cheerfulness (i.e., Helena), and grant

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>22</sup> See R.-J. Loenertz, “Démétrius Cydonès, II: De 1373 à 1375,” *OCP* 37 (1971), 15–18, 30 ff; and F. Kianka, “Byzantine-Papal Diplomacy: The Role of Demetrios Kydones,” *International History Review* 7 (1985), 206–7, with source references.

that I bow before you, who would rightly be honored by all for every reason.

But it is not yet the time to think about my return (to Constantinople), because I must respect the invitation, the care, and the honor that your brother-in-law has lavished on me, which surpass those which he would show toward his brothers. But when his enthusiasm flags—and I am convinced that the change that necessarily follows on every mortal reality will produce this in him, even if he is always eager to add to his display of friendship—then I will not appear meanspirited when I think about returning, provided, however—which my conscience guarantees me—that the most holy emperors do not hold a grudge against me for having gone away, and that they do not consider my friendship for those who have not done anything wrong to be contempt for them, and that they do not take offense at seeing me honor a man whom they themselves honor. For the justice of such behavior has given me the courage to undertake this journey. In fact, if they had expressly forbidden it, I would not have been so mad as to choose to serve others before them. I beg you, then, to make them more indulgent toward me, and I ask you to send me a letter containing your advice on this, which I will receive as if it were an oracle, and I promise to do nothing contrary to what seems best to you.

#### *Commentary*

In this letter Kydones asks Helena to write to him and advise him on how to get out of his predicament: he wants to return to Constantinople and to the emperors' service, but he fears that they have interpreted his visit to Lesbos as a mark of disloyalty to them. The letter testifies to a continuing pattern of correspondence and frequent conversations between Kydones and Helena, thus filling in our meager knowledge of their long-standing, friendly relationship. It also indicates his habit of seeking advice and comfort from her: Kydones says he will regard her advice as that of an oracle. Helena's advice played a significant role in the lives of her children as well. Manuel II, for example, mentions his mother's advice to him and his brothers; she "exercised by far the strongest influence on her sons in advising them as to what they ought to do."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Manuel II Palaeologus, *Funeral Oration on His Brother Theodore*, ed. J. Chrysostomides, CFHB 26 (Thessaloniki, 1985), p. 103, lines 2–4; see also p. 101, lines 7–8.

The tone of this letter differs significantly from that of the first three letters translated and discussed above (letters 389, 25, and 256), in which Kydones is concerned primarily with literature, literary composition, and learning. Here he is writing to a woman who is both influential and merciful, experienced in practical political affairs and also able and willing to give sound advice to him, an older man who himself is no stranger to court politics and the appeasement of emperors. He fully expects Helena to make the emperors "more indulgent" toward him. He assumes that she is on his side and will be effective in interceding for him.

In fact, Kydones did manage to placate the emperor at this time. He returned to Constantinople in the winter of 1374–75 in time to be of service during the visit of four legates of Pope Gregory XI, who were in Constantinople to discuss the pope's plans for a crusade of several western powers against the Turks.<sup>24</sup>

#### VI. LETTER 222

Kydones wrote letter 222 (after June 1392) to Helena to thank her for the gifts that she gave him and members of his family on the eve of her entry into the convent of Kyra Martha in Constantinople. Kydones praises her for her generosity, warm affection for him, and many kindnesses to him in the course of their long friendship (approximately forty-five years). In a sympathetic way he relates the many difficulties and hardships that she has had to endure and master as the daughter, wife, and mother of emperors at war with each other and at odds with the Ottoman Turks. First, her father, John VI, and her brother Matthew fought her husband, John V (1352–54); then, in 1373 her eldest son, Andronikos IV, rebelled against his father. From 1379 to 1381 she, together with her aged father and her sisters, was taken hostage and imprisoned by Andronikos because he suspected her of aiding his father against him.<sup>25</sup>

Letter 222 is the longest letter in Kydones' collection; at 204 lines, it is several times the length of a typical letter. For the sake of brevity, it is summarized and excerpted here rather than fully translated.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Kianka, "Byzantine-Papal Diplomacy," 207–8.

<sup>25</sup> D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261–1453* (New York, 1972), 245 ff, 288 ff; idem, *Kantakouzenos Family*, 81–84, 91, 137.

<sup>26</sup> For a complete translation, see the French version by Cammelli, *Démétrios Kydonès Correspondance*, letter 28, pp. 68–77.

### Summary

Kydones praises Helena for her *pronoia* (benevolence) toward him, which he calls God's special gift to him, and thanks her for the many kindnesses she has shown him (lines 5–6). She has given him not only material possessions but honors, either directly by inventing them herself or indirectly by interceding for him with the emperor, John V. Helena has praised Kydones excessively and given an example to others, who also praised him. She has helped him many times in his various difficulties in political and court life. "Thus God, preparing you as a many-sided remedy of wondrous strength and effectiveness, bestowed you on me in my financial need, in my illnesses, when there were calumnies against me, and during my bouts of discouragement—all the occasions on which I needed help" (lines 26–28). Helena has "clearly shown how great a place I hold in your thoughts, which difficult times have not diminished, continual troubles have not broken, nor the length of time which brings forgetfulness with it has wiped out, but it has remained, not surrendering to such great evils" (lines 35–38).

Then there follows a description of Helena's trials and sufferings, which Kydones compares to those by which God tested Job's steadfastness (lines 44–46). The devil "aroused suspicion, envy, and discord among the closest relatives, persuading each one to consider the ruin of his relations to be his own salvation" (lines 50–52). "Neglecting their natural enemies (i.e., the Turks), they attacked each other . . . you lamented equally over the victors and the vanquished" (lines 56–59). Helena's compassion for the defeated members of her family was suspect, however. Her balancing act between loyalty to and love for her husband and her son led to greater hardships for her. "You would have had to betray one or the other, while in all justice you owed all of them the same love" (lines 65–66).

When her husband, John V, and her sons Manuel and Theodore managed to escape from prison in June 1379, Helena was blamed and herself imprisoned, along with her father and sisters, "women who are worthy of their birth, and who are not inferior in any way to any men who ever lived" (lines 101–2). On her release from prison in May–June 1381, "no one wanted to remain at home . . . the whole city turned out" to welcome her back (lines 134–35).

Before entering the convent, Helena distributed

her goods largely to the poor, as was the rule, but she reserved a few gifts for her close friends, and Kydones was among them (lines 170–77). He praises Helena for her wisdom and virtue (line 182). She is both a lover of learning and a person who practices virtue: "You have restored to honor the studies that were already nearly dead and have drawn from your own studies so much profit that you have surpassed many men who have grown old in that art" (lines 189–92).

He concludes his long letter by asking Helena to allow him access to her even in her cloistered life, so that he may continue to enjoy the close contact to which he has been accustomed during their long friendship. This would be her greatest gift to him (lines 200–204).

### Commentary

This lengthy letter had such a great effect on the imperial family that Manuel II wrote to Kydones in order to thank him for his "wonderfully sweet letter."<sup>27</sup> Even allowing for the requisite hyperbole in praising an imperial benefactress, Kydones' letter 222 clearly indicates Helena's important role in his life. It also confirms her educational achievements and her patronage of those involved in literature and learning. But most of all it bears witness to her strong character and, of course, her bitter involvement in the dynastic turmoil of the last half of the fourteenth century. Her most trying experience was no doubt her years of imprisonment and deprivation at the hands of her eldest son, Andronikos.

In connection with Helena's educational attainments and support for learning, it is worth noting that in letter 398 to Manuel (1388) Kydones speaks of Helena as the person to whom Manuel owes his education (*παιδεία*).<sup>28</sup> Now, Kydones himself was Manuel's revered mentor, as Manuel's own statements bear witness.<sup>29</sup> But perhaps his mother gave him his primary education and was instrumental in choosing Kydones to continue his education in the classics. Manuel and his mother are the two principals in his *Dialogue on Marriage*, a work that he sent to Kydones together with his letter 62, a cover letter.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *The Letters of Manuel II Palaeologus*, ed. G. T. Dennis, DOT 4, CFHB 8 (Washington, D.C., 1977), letter 23, p. 64, line 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Corr.*, II, letter 398, p. 353, lines 21 ff; cf. R.-J. Loenertz, "L'exil de Manuel II à Lemnos," *OCP* 38 (1972), 135–36.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Manuel's letter 11, ed. Dennis, p. 31, lines 21 ff.

<sup>30</sup> For Manuel's letter 62, see *ibid.*, 172–74; for the *Dialogue on Marriage*, see xxiii, 172 and note 1, and the edition by C. Bev-



The date that Helena entered the convent of Kyra Martha has been considered as after 16 February 1391, the death of John V. In June 1391 Manuel had to return to Asia Minor on the orders of Bayezid, the Ottoman sultan, and left his mother in Constantinople as regent. He did not return to Constantinople until January 1392, and Helena is mentioned as being at court as late as July of that year.<sup>31</sup> It is unlikely, but not impossible, that she left her convent during that time in order to act as regent in Manuel's place and to deal with matters of state even after his return. Thus after July 1392 is perhaps the best approximation of the date of her entry into the convent.

Helena's religious name was Hypomone (patience, endurance), a virtue that no doubt stood her in good stead during her lifetime. The convent of Kyra Martha had a history of connections with the Palaiologos and Kantakouzenos families.<sup>32</sup> The convent was founded in the late thirteenth century by Maria (religious name, Martha), the sister of Michael VIII Palaiologos. Helena's grandmother, Theodora Kantakouzene, was buried there in 1342, and her mother, Eirene (religious name, Eugenia), and sister Maria also became nuns at the convent. Eirene entered the convent in 1354 when her husband, John VI, abdicated and became the monk Joasaph. Helena's sister Maria was the widow of the despot Nikephoros II of Epiros when she entered the convent.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In 1955 Vitalien Laurent observed that Palaiologan empresses played a greater role in historical events than had been noticed up to that time. He called for a more thorough investigation of their influence and mentioned the "acerbic recriminations of a contemporary against John VIII Palaiologos for taking the advice of his mother and his wife in everything."<sup>33</sup> This brief study of the rela-

tionship between Demetrios Kydones and Empress Helena Kantakouzene Palaiologina has attempted to answer Laurent's call in a minor way, throwing some light on Helena's role in the events of the later fourteenth century and examining her influence on the life and career of one of the key players in that period. The attempt is hampered by the lack of sources, the nature of those that are extant, and especially by the absence of any written works of Helena herself. As is the case for many other medieval women, we can study her life and influence only through the eyes of others. But unlike most other women of her time, she enjoyed a lifelong friendship with a man who was not only at the center of political and intellectual life, but also a talented writer.

Kydones' letters to Helena perhaps shed more light on her than her own attempts at literary composition might have done, had they survived, considering the Byzantine penchant for imitative prose and impersonal style. It has often been said that Byzantine literature is "timeless," lacking historical reference points.<sup>34</sup> Although this is often true of Byzantine letters, including many written by Kydones, several of the letters discussed above are not lacking in informative detail. Taken as a whole, Kydones' letters inform us about their author as perhaps no other Byzantine literary form could. They provide key information on the details and chronology of his life and political career and thus have enabled historians to compose a reasonably clear account of it. The letters also provide information on Kydones' education, family, social background, and literary activities, especially his interest in classical authors and in translating the works of Latin writers such as Aquinas and Augustine. Despite the literary commonplaces and *topoi*, on which Kydones elaborated with such great skill, many of these letters are not only literary efforts but also real revelations of the author's thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and character. Written over a period of some fifty years, they are significant not only as sources of fact but also as psychological documents of importance.

Helena may have been in part responsible for Kydones' return to government service in 1355 as John V's *mesazōn*. She may have played a role in his returning to imperial favor in 1374–75 and in his remaining in the government for so long, despite his various troubles at court, which were often due

egni, *Manuelis Palaeologi Dialogus de matrimonio*, Περὶ γάμου (Catanania, 1989).

<sup>31</sup>Nicol, *Kantakouzenos Family*, 137; Venetian archives, Misti 42, fols. 14v, 71v, ed. Loenertz, *Corr.*, II, pp. 445, 449–50; cf. J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391–1425): A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1969), 87, 99.

<sup>32</sup>See A.-M. Talbot, "The Byzantine Family and the Monastery," *DOP* 44 (1990), 122 and note 28. On Kyra Martha in general, see V. Laurent, "Kyra Martha: Essai de topographie et de prosopographie byzantine," *EO* 38 (1939), 296–320, and R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin*, 3. *Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique* (Paris, 1969), 324–26.

<sup>33</sup>V. Laurent, "La date de la mort d'Hélène Paléologue," *REB* 13 (1955), 135 and note 1.

<sup>34</sup>See, e.g., C. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (New York, 1980), 241.

to his controversial positions. She may not have shared Kydones' anti-Palamism or his pro-Latin views, but she may nonetheless have provided a measure of additional support that helped him sustain his lengthy political career. But these are all mere possibilities. There is much more that we

would like to know about Helena, which leads one to lament the onesidedness of the extant correspondence between Kydones and his imperial patron.

Dumbarton Oaks